

THUNDER
ON
THE LEFT

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Comments and
Controversies by
Various Critics

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THE situation is decidedly up to the public for discussion. There is but one entrance requirement. To know what you are talking about you must possess one copy of a black book with a blue label and entitled *Thunder on the Left*.

HARRY HANSEN, in the *Chicago Daily News*.

"The ordinary straightforward novel of action and seduction and adventure would be child's play in comparison, because in this I've got to show the whole thing through a veil of moonlight."

Christopher Morley

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INTERPRETED

Critics and Readers Tell What Mr. Morley's Strange Story Means

AMONG the notionable dictes of antique Rome was the fancy that when men heard *thunder on the left* the gods had somewhat of special advertisement to impart. Then did the prudent pause and lay down their affaires to study what omen Jove intended," said Sir Eustace Peachtree in *The Dangers of This Mortal Life*. Morley's use of this phrase from Sir Eustace as his title, suggests that his story is a book of omens, a book in which the gods talk; but just what omen Jove intends is a mystery that is interpreted in almost as many ways as there are readers.

Rarely has a book been so much discussed, puzzled over, disagreed about; and rarely has an author been so besieged with requests to explain what is the true significance of his work. What is the allegory? he is asked. Is it spirit triumphing over animalism? Is it a satire, a travesty, a dream? What has the mouse to do with it, and why tailless, and above all what is the omen of the thunder? Mr. Morley remains silent. He prefers to let each one interpret the thunder of the gods in his own way, but for those who are interested to know what others have found in this singular story, we have gathered together some of the comments of both book reviewers and thoughtful private readers.

Hugh Walpole's preface to the English edition, which we quote herewith, is one of the most amiable interpretations that has appeared:

"I am aware of a certain hesitation in writing this preface

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to Mr. Morley's book; I seem to have involved myself rather arrogantly during the last year or two in the prefacing of American works of fiction. You may well ask what business is it of mine, why don't I let them speak for themselves? But I think the explanation lies in this, that a number of us who are keenly interested in the modern American novel feel that there is just now in England a conviction far too widely spread that the American novel of to-day is following always a convention, a convention either of the Middle West and the small American town, or of the cow-boy and the rescued heroine, or the smart night life of New York. Of course there is no truth in this whatever, the new American novel is rapidly becoming one of the most individual forces in the world of literature. We have only to consider that during the last few years we have had Cabell's *Jurgen*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, Willa Cather's *Lost Lady*, Carl van Vechten's *Peter Whiffle*, Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to realise the thrilling differences of the new American fiction.

"And now Christopher Morley's *Thunder on the Left* surely joins this list. Whatever else you may say about the book this at least is true, that nobody else in the wide world could have written it, and that was at one time the last thing I would have expected ever to say about this writer's work. For, delightful though his earlier essays, fantasies, and poetry have been, they were of a recognized fantastic sentimental school and the dangerous name of Barrie seemed to have been written over Mr. Morley's private door. Barrie's perilous moments (and there have been many) have been saved, often when one thought that all was lost, by rescues of genius, but that has made his school a dangerous one to work in. As with Barrie's own sometimes irritating infant there has seemed a danger that Christopher Morley was never going to grow up, and then suddenly, without a word of warning, he produces this astonishingly mature work. His gifts were as many as they were dangerous and that especial danger of finding life too enchanting to be true is difficult to escape because it becomes so easily a habit; but in *Thunder on the Left* the beauty and the fantasy are present as emphatically as ever they have been in Mr. Morley's

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work, but to them many other things are added. You may say if you like to be very self-confident that you don't know what this book means (there will be people who will say this) or you may interpret it at its simplest (if you do this you will be laughed at by clever people who see in it much more than you do) or you may be wonderfully subtle about it and use it as a provocative of your own brilliance (and then people will say how conceited you have become), and this is, I think, one of the greatest powers of the book, that it is personal to every reader, it will become for everyone a reflection of himself. I don't wish this to sound too alarming. At its simplest it is a story of certain children who, feeling the difference between their own world and that of their elders, thought that they would be spies and discover this country into which they must themselves one day travel; or if you wish to disregard even that interpretation you may take it simply for its incidental things, the brilliance of the writing, the beauty of the scene, the liveliness of the dialogue, the human nature and the character. In all of these things Mr. Morley has become, if I may say so without patronage, astonishingly mature. His fantasies have been before poetic, other-worldly; in this book the fantasy is not simply a sop to comfort but thrills with apprehension. From the first word to the last we are conscious of the thunder on the left as in every serious study of life we ought to be, and it is just this consciousness that marks off the world of the grown-ups from the world of the children.

"Martin accepts his toy mouse like a little gentleman, but the world of himself and his friends is not disturbed in any way by the circumstances or the possibilities of the gift; the children, we feel, are confident and unalarmed because they have accepted quite tranquilly the conditions of their life, they know the things that are valuable and the things that are not. But the grown-up world is filled with apprehension, dismay, and misunderstanding, it is as though the children were cast from their own sun-lit country into a dark and tangled jungle; Martin is there to show them the way, but he is just out of touch with them and they are all of them out of touch with one another. Here by the way I think

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Mr. Morley might have been a little clearer. I mean in showing more plainly that George is Martin's grown-up self, that Martin is spying on his own maturity and is dismayed by what he sees, just as George is angry with Martin because then he perceives what lovely things he has lost. Like Jones in Eugene O'Neill's play they hear the drums on every side of them hurry now here, now there, and make no progress.

"It is with a sigh of relief that the reader returns in the last pages to the children's world again, not because there is no unhappiness nor distress there but because the children realise their conditions and know to what they must trust.

"This may not be the true explanation of Christopher Morley's beautiful book; as I have said already the reaction of everybody to the story will be individual and for that reason no general explanation is needed. I fancy that no book published this year in England will arouse so much discussion as this. Interpretations of life are tiresome when they are self-conscious and I fancy that here, as always when work is fine and true, the author has created something not as he would but as he must, and is here an interpreter of a world more wonderful than he himself knows."—HUGH WALPOLE.

Among other comments which show from how many different angles the book has been read, are these:

LLOYD MORRIS says, in the *New York Times*, "A fable of uncompromisingly austere design. The dominant mood of his novel is that of tragic irony. The novel is, however, a comedy as the ancients defined that term; it is a profoundly honest interpretation of actuality. Comedy implies the maintenance of a consistent intellectual attitude to life. And, perhaps because this attitude is strictly objective, thoroughly disillusioned and invariably acceptant of the actual, the attitude of comedy is conspicuously rare in American fiction. Mr. Morley, rising to this attitude, has written a novel which illustrates an idea and yields a powerful emotion. And he has written it with an art that is never uncertain, never relaxed, never inadequate to his purpose. . . . The rapid and inevitable tragedy, lying not in the immediate situation but in the perception of experience

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by the characters, constitutes one of the most moving pictures of American life recently achieved in our fiction. *Thunder on the Left* is one of very few American novels that have been written beautifully; in this book Mr. Morley has achieved an almost flawless prose that yields the effect of poetry."

And again, "There runs through it with almost desperate earnestness a sense of pain and loveliness that lie at the very heart of life."

The *Baltimore Sun* comments, "It is lovely. It is human and also sad; gay but bitter; it caresses and it hurts; sometimes a fantastic dream, sometimes hurting us to the quick, bringing simultaneously a smile and a quick catch of the breath. Read it and make of it what you will."

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS finds in it a surprising spirit of sacrilege: "His references to the most sacred things in the Christian religion are the most sacrilegious things I have seen in print by any modern author."

HEYWOOD BROWN delights in it because, "There is great beauty in the Morley book and deep emotion. And the novel is agreeably carnal."

CARL VAN DOREN finds Morley's methods justified: "He has justified his method by the skill with which he fuses reality and fancy. They do not fall apart at the analytic touch, any more than soil and air fall apart when they have joined to make a tree."

BABETTE DEUTSCH writes, in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, "Its construction is so abounding in fine surprises, its fantasy is so graceful, its writing is so felicitous, that the reader begs only to be allowed to sip it slowly, as befits a cordial of rich bouquet and benign authority." This firm and limpid language, rolling along as smoothly as a croquet ball and suddenly changing—*Alice-in-Wonderland* fashion—into a live hedgehog, bristling with prickly implications, is not to be confused with the style of any contemporary writing in English."

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The *International Book Review* finds a unity of intention: "There are some achievements that mock analysis, that are so near perfection that their apprehension is a measure of the quality not of the artist but of the audience. One of these is Christopher Morley's *Thunder on the Left*, a book in which every word marches with an almost painful unity of intention to the expression of a philosophy about life. This profound unity gives to the book a vision, usually confined to poetry or abstract philosophy, of the great laws that govern life . . . the theme suggests Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, with the difference that Morley seems to be emphasizing the frustration rather than the fulfilment of the human spirit."

LEONARD BACON, on the other hand, gets lost in an African jungle: "The book is at best a Pyrrhic Victory. In spite of the charm and wisdom with which it is written, it somehow manages to be neither whimsy nor fantasy . . . in the wild and uncertain regions of the fantastic imagination he has rather the air of a New Englander lost in tropical bush. He does not slide between the fronds of the tattacu and the cowfoot with the native's shadow-like grace. . . . The gulf between the Africa of fantasy and the tame and ordered Europe of whimsy is hard to cross. Mr. Morley has made a valiant effort to find out the strange coast opposite those shores he knows so well. He has found a wreath of seaweed from a tropic reef."

Another says, "For the sensitive reader it holds terror of a rare kind."

A professor in a Pennsylvania university finds only well written bosh: "I gather that your last book deals with those impassioned curiosities, those frightened and frightening imaginings which baffle all of us because we do not know how to approach them, to receive them, to assuage them. You may be right, I may be wrong. But *Thunder on the Left* is a book of beautiful and fascinating perplexities, an absurd mixture of fact and fantasy, clever and intriguing, but which is after all, in my poor opinion, nothing more than well written bosh."

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One masculine reader insists that *Thunder on the Left* is "preeminently a man's book. Like Conrad, Morley's finest things (and some of them here are worthy of Conrad at his best) appeal to men—to men to whom life is a high adventure, and again to whom the little hilarities are not the least of them."

JOHN HYDE PRESTON says, in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, "In an age when most novelists find life in unbathed flesh and leave it bleeding, it is not a little encouraging to recognize that we are in the presence of a man who sees, through the medium of an imagination on tip-toe, into the truer 'life beyond life,' a man who, in his own words, knows 'that poets have not lied; that fairy tales are true; that life is hunger, and for every emptiness caters its own just food.' Here, too, is a man who knows that realism, as a method, is merely the last refuge of those who do not see human nature, and that the clearness of fantasy is the mother of all reality. For the fact is, that fantasy considers life in its permanent relations, while realism simply takes a bad photograph of its more transient and incidental aspects. Only a man with a fleet sense of humour and a winged imagination (Christopher Morley has the qualifications) can show us how essentially grave and amusing our earthly play-time is."

But this, from a writer of fine judgment and maturity, is perhaps the most curious comment of all: "To me it is a wail of anguish—a very terrible tragedy of middle age—though softened by many whimsicalities and prevented from being too autobiographic by certain phantasmagorical trappings. A strange book, a powerful book. I am sorry you were able to write it and that I am able to understand it."

So it goes—to each reader the book means a different thing, modified by the experience that he brings to it from his own consciousness. The thing that remains constant with all readers is its power to stir the emotion and lay hold of the imagination with a certain strange and powerful fascination.

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LEAVES FROM A NOTEBOOK

These quotations which were found in the little black notebook that served as a store-room for snatches of thoughts, trial phrases, and germs of ideas for Thunder on the Left, which Mr. Morley jotted down while he was at work on the book, are an illuminating index to his purpose:

Je définirais le livre une oeuvre de sorcellerie d'où s'échappent toutes sortes d'images qui troublent les esprits et changent les coeurs.—ANATOLE FRANCE

The worst of the usual realist is that, being blinder than any other heathen in his blindness, he tries to exorcise dream, though sometimes not nightmare, from life.—GEORGE SAINTSBURY, in *Marcel Proust: An English Tribute* (1923)

There is no rest for a messenger till the message is delivered.—JOSEPH CONRAD, *The Rescue*

They have sympathy not for beggars and cats alone. Their heart aches for what the eye does not see.—ANTON CHEKHOV

A work of art whose aim and meaning were quite clear to the writer in the act of writing it, would perish, as the universe would perish if its aim were clearly known to it.—WILLIAM GERHARDI

Prepare to meet with Caliban.—*The Tempest*, ACT IV

With a heart of furious fancies
Whereof I am commander,
With a burning spear
And a horse of air
To the wilderness I wander.

—Tom o' Bedlam

Spirit must brand the flesh, that it may live.—GEORGE MEREDITH

To see the world as Beauty is the whole end of living.—HAVELOCK ELLIS

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And methought that beauty and terror
Are only one, not two.

—R. L. S.

At the end truth is the only thing worth having: it's more thrilling than love, more joyful and more passionate. It simply *cannot* fail. All else fails. I, at any rate, give the remainder of my life to it and it alone.—KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Style is order and movement. Order is not pattern; it is the coördinating thought that creates and holds together the artistic whole. Movement is not speed; it is continuity, it is rhythm continued through subject and mood to association and atmosphere. The true artist is absorbed "in a kind of controlled excitement and directed purpose, endeavoring to embody his ideal of how the subject should be treated as well as in love with the subject itself.—H. S. CANBY, in a review of Brownell's *The Genius of Style*

Aesthetic emotion is that from which man lets himself be most easily diverted by love, so easy, almost fatal, is the passage from one to the other. This intimate union between art and love is, moreover, the sole explanation of art. Without it—without this genital repercussion—it would never have been born; and, without it, it would not be perpetuated. Nothing is useless in deep-seated human habits. Everything which has lasted is, for that reason, necessary. Art is the accomplice of love. Take love away and there is no longer art. Take art away, and love becomes merely a physiological need. . . . Aesthetic emotion, even in its purest, most disinterested form, is, then, merely a deviation of the genital emotion. Fortunate short-circuit which has permitted us to reflect, to compare, to judge! The emotional current has become diffused, thus forming that mixture of emotion and intelligence which gives us the aesthetic sense.—RÉMY DE GOURMONT, *Decadence* (Translated by W. A. Bradley)

